



**Homeland
Security**

Privacy Office, Mail Stop 0655

April 19, 2019

SENT BY ELECTRONIC MAIL TO: foia@americanoversight.org

Austin R. Evers
American Oversight
1030 15th Street, NW
Suite B255
Washington, DC 20005

Re: 2018-HQFO-01496

Dear Mr. Evers:

This is the final response to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), dated September 20, 2018, and received by this office on September 21, 2018. You are seeking records reflecting communications from any political appointees in the immediate Office of the Secretary or the Office of Public Affairs concerning President Trump's following tweets regarding the death toll from Hurricane Maria: Tweet ; <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>; <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040730663832498176> ; <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040783519423913984> <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040788151000883201> <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560> "yet 70% of the power was out before" "3000 people did not die".

A search of the Office of the Chief Information Officer for documents responsive to your request produced a total of 33 pages. Of those pages, I have determined that 20 pages of the records are releasable in their entirety, 13 pages are partially releasable pursuant to Title 5 U.S.C. § 552: (b) (6). FOIA Exemptions 6.

Enclosed are pages with certain information withheld as described below.

FOIA Exemption 6 exempts from disclosure personnel or medical files and similar files the release of which would cause a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. This requires a balancing of the public's right to disclosure against the individual's right to privacy. The privacy interests of the individuals in the records you have requested outweigh any minimal public interest in disclosure of the information. Any private interest you may have in that information does not factor into the aforementioned balancing test.

You have a right to appeal the above withholding determination. Should you wish to do so, you must send your appeal and a copy of this letter, within 90 days of the date of this letter, to: Privacy Office, Attn: FOIA Appeals, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 245 Murray Lane, SW, Mail Stop 0655, Washington, D.C. 20528-0655, following the procedures outlined in the DHS FOIA regulations at 6 C.F.R. Part 5 § 5.8. Your envelope and letter should be marked "FOIA Appeal." Copies of the FOIA and DHS FOIA regulations are available at www.dhs.gov/foia.

Provisions of FOIA allow DHS to charge for processing fees, up to \$25, unless you seek a waiver of fees. In this instance, because the cost is below the \$25 minimum, there is no charge.

Additionally, you have a right to seek dispute resolution services from the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) which mediates disputes between FOIA requesters and Federal agencies as a non-exclusive alternative to litigation. If you are requesting access to your own records (which is considered a Privacy Act request), you should know that OGIS does not have the authority to handle requests made under the Privacy Act of 1974. You may contact OGIS as follows: Office of Government Information Services, National Archives and Records Administration, 8601 Adelphi Road-OGIS, College Park, Maryland 20740-6001, e-mail at ogis@nara.gov; telephone at 202-741-5770; toll free at 1-877-684-6448; or facsimile at 202-741-5769.

If you need any further assistance or would like to discuss any aspect of your request, please contact the analyst below who processed your request and refer to **2018-HQFO-01496**. You may send an e-mail to foia@hq.dhs.gov, call 202-343-1743 or toll free 1-866-431-0486, or you may contact our FOIA Public Liaison in the same manner.

Sincerely,



Jeremiah Parker
FOIA Program Specialist

Enclosure(s): Responsive Documents, 33 pages

From:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
To:	"Wolf, Chad (b)(6) (b)(6) "Taylor, Miles (b)(6) (b)(6) "Wales, Brandon (b)(6) (b)(6) "Hoffman, Jonathan (b)(6) (b)(6) "Lim, Evelyn (b)(6) (b)(6)
Subject:	FW: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:06:43
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

FYI

Tyler Q. Houlton

Press Secretary

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

(b)(6)

From: Comms Alert (b)(6)
Sent: Thursday, September 13, 2018 8:52 AM
Subject: Donald J. Trump Tweets

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

.....This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible when I was successfully raising Billions of Dollars to help rebuild Puerto Rico. If a person died for any reason, like old age, just add them onto the list. Bad politics. I love Puerto Rico!

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
Recipient:	"Wolf, Chad (b)(6) (b)(6)

	"Taylor, Miles (b)(6) (b)(6) "Wales, Brandon (b)(6) (b)(6) "Hoffman, Jonathan (b)(6) (b)(6) "Lim, Evelyn (b)(6) (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 09:06:43

From:	(b)(6)
Subject:	Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:10:03
Type:	Note

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

.....This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible when I was successfully raising Billions of Dollars to help rebuild Puerto Rico. If a person died for any reason, like old age, just add them onto the list. Bad politics. I love Puerto Rico!

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	(b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 09:10:02
Delivered Date:	2018/09/13 09:10:03

From:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
To:	"S1KMN (b)(6)
CC:	"Wolf, Chad (b)(6)
	"Hoffman, Jonathan (b)(6)
	"Lim, Evelyn (b)(6)
	"Taylor, Miles (b)(6)
Subject:	Saturday Clips
Date:	2018/09/15 10:43:28
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

Ma'am,

Please see clips below and let me know if you have any questions. Thanks.

[WSJ: White House Considered Replacing FEMA Chief as Florence Was Gathering Steam](#)

[ABC: Florence by the numbers: 7 dead, more than 900K without power, strongest wind gust in 60 years hits Wilmington](#)

[USA Today: 'Uninvited brute': Florence leaves 7 dead; threatens Carolinas with 15 more inches of rain](#)

[NBC: FEMA to test 'Presidential Alert' system next week](#)

[ABC: Congress subpoenas 'uncooperative' DHS official amid accusations of punishing whistleblowers](#)

[AP: Telling the stories of Puerto Rican victims of Maria](#)

TRUMP TWEETS:

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

"The story of Puerto Rico is the rebuilding that has occurred. The President has done an extraordinary job of cleanup, rebuilding electrical stuff and everything else."

@EdRollins "The people of Puerto Rico have one of the most corrupt governments in our country." @LouDobbs

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040760021443850241>

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

"When Trump visited the island territory last October, OFFICIALS told him in a briefing 16 PEOPLE had died from Maria." The Washington Post. This was long AFTER the

hurricane took place. Over many months it went to 64 PEOPLE. Then, like magic, “3000 PEOPLE KILLED.” They hired....

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040783519423913984>

FULL STORIES:

White House Considered Replacing FEMA Chief as Florence Was Gathering Steam

Wall Street Journal

Michael C. Bender

September 14, 2018 – 8:33 PM

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-considered-replacing-fema-chief-as-florence-was-gathering-steam-1536971587>

Internal investigation is looking into Brock Long's use of federal resources during frequent travel to his North Carolina home

As Hurricane Florence was barreling toward the East Coast, senior Trump administration officials considered replacing the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency amid allegations that he misused resources traveling to his home in North Carolina, according to people familiar with the matter.

FEMA Administrator Brock Long is the target of an internal investigation looking into frequent travel between the nation's capital and his home in Hickory, N.C., according to people briefed on the probe. The investigation included surveilling Mr. Long as he was driven 400 miles each way on his commute, the people said.

Investigators have told administration officials that Mr. Long, while under surveillance, often left agency headquarters on Thursdays and traveled home with a caravan of federal workers, who stayed in nearby hotels for the long weekend, the people said. He has spent about 150 days in North Carolina since he took over the job last year, the people said.

Mr. Long declined, through a spokeswoman, to comment on Friday. He has previously denied any wrongdoing and he didn't attend a pair of FEMA news conferences Friday afternoon about the storm.

The White House has begun discussing potential replacements for Mr. Long, a senior White House official said.

At a media briefing on Thursday, Mr. Long said he “would never intentionally run a program incorrectly” and pledged to cooperate with the investigation, and that he and the agency were “100% focused” on the approaching storm. “That’s exactly where our attention needs to be from the standpoint of the life safety mission,” he said.

The Department of Homeland Security inspector general is also reviewing communications between Mr. Long and a FEMA contractor that appear to include

discussions about future employment, said one of the people briefed on the investigation. Investigators are also looking into an accident involving an SUV, owned by the federal government and used to transport the director, that wasn't properly reported, the person said.

Mr. Long was informed last fall by DHS attorneys and the inspector general that his trips home violated the law, the people said. The inspector general's office has told administration officials that they tailed Mr. Long's caravan to determine whether he was using federal resources to return home despite the warnings, the person briefed on the investigation said.

The inspector general's final report is expected in the coming days, but preliminary findings have been shared with DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, administration officials said. The existence of the investigation was earlier reported by Politico on Thursday.

Ms. Nielsen brought details of the preliminary findings to Mr. Long and urged him to resign if the allegations were accurate, one administration official said. Another official familiar with the situation disputed that the secretary made that suggestion to Mr. Long.

A DHS spokesman declined to address the allegations, referring questions to the inspector general's office. The inspector general's office didn't respond to requests for comment.

"At this time, we are fully focused on preparing for, responding to, and recovering from Hurricane Florence and the storms in the Pacific," DHS spokesman Tyler Houlton said in a statement. "The secretary is confident in the leadership at FEMA and their proven disaster management ability."

Senior White House officials discussed replacing Mr. Long in the past several days, according to one person familiar with the matter. White House chief of staff John Kelly ultimately decided to leave Mr. Long in place until the final report was available, the person said. A White House spokeswoman declined to comment.

President Trump has been meeting with Mr. Long regularly in recent days as Hurricane Florence prompted flooding and heavy rains on the Southeast coast. On Tuesday, Mr. Trump praised his FEMA director as someone "who's done so well for us" during storms that hit Texas and Florida last year.

Inside FEMA, Mr. Long is well liked. Several FEMA officials said privately that they felt conflicted about reports of his travel.

One FEMA official said Friday the administrator has national-security duties, and the use of government vehicles supports that effort and allows for him to ensure classified communication. The official also said that in previous administrations, using vehicles in a similar fashion was routine practice. Officials were working to resolve any discrepancies in the use of specialized vehicles and federal laws, the official said.

Mr. Long joined the administration when Ms. Nielsen was chief of staff at DHS and Mr. Kelly was the secretary. Previously, Mr. Long was an executive at Hagerty Consulting, an Illinois-based emergency-management consulting firm with offices in Washington. Mr. Long also ran the Alabama Emergency Management Agency and was an emergency-management official in Georgia. He also has previously worked at FEMA.

Mr. Long is the latest Trump administration official to face questions about improper use of federal resources while traveling.

Scott Pruitt, the former EPA administrator, resigned in July amid allegations of ethical lapses and improper spending, including \$163,000 on first-class flights, military aircraft and charter flights. Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price resigned last September over his extensive use of private jets and military flights.

Florence by the numbers: 7 dead, more than 900K without power, strongest wind gust in 60 years hits Wilmington

ABC

By Emily Shapiro, DANIEL MANZO, JEFFREY COOK

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/hurricane-florence-numbers-latest-power-outages-rain-totals/story?id=57819104>

[Hurricane Florence](#) is slamming into the East Coast, knocking out power in North Carolina, dropping torrential rains and inundating several areas with floodwater.

Here is a look at the dangerous [storm](#) by the numbers:

7: The number of fatalities so far. The first death attributed to Florence was in coastal Pender County, North Carolina. An official there called it a “storm-related medical fatality” but did not elaborate.

Police in Wilmington police disclosed that a mother and an infant were killed when a tree fell on their home. The husband was transported to a local hospital with injuries, according to police.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper said one person died in Lenoir County while plugging in a generator. Lenoir County Emergency Services Director Roger Dail later noted that it was a 78-year-old male in Kinston who was electrocuted when he was trying to connect two extension cords outside in the rain.

Dail said that the fifth reported death also occurred in Kinston, which was that of a 77-year-old man. His body was discovered at his residence this morning by family members and it is believed that he died when he was blown down when he went outside to check on his hunting dogs.

On Saturday, Carteret County Director of Emergency Services Stephen Rea confirmed two people died in Harkers Island, North Carolina, early Friday. The deaths did not come as a result of drowning he said, but could not provide further details.

105 mph: As the storm made landfall Friday morning, Wilmington, North Carolina, was hit by a 105 mph wind gust, the strongest wind in the city since 1958.

150: The number of people who needed to be rescued in flooded New Bern, North Carolina, where water levels reached 10 feet overnight.

The downtown area, at the confluence of two rivers, is mostly underwater.

Volunteers are using private boats to pitch in and help, city spokeswoman Colleen Roberts said.

New Bern resident George Zaytoun, who chose not to heed evacuation warnings and is now trapped inside his home, told "Good Morning America," "It's like a bomb has gone off."

"Everything around us is underwater," he said.

"This is twice the size of Hurricane Hugo," which tore through the Carolinas in 1989, New Bern Mayor Dana Outlaw told "Good Morning America."

At least 100 people have been rescued from New Bern as of Friday morning, North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper said.

310: Number of volunteers from nine different states helping the Cajun Navy with rescues.

57: Number of people the Cajun Navy says they rescued Friday morning, according to the founder of the group, Todd Terrell.

23 inches: As of 5 a.m. Saturday, Newport and Morehead City had received about 23.75 inches of rainfall, about a quarter inch shy of breaking the all-time rain record for North Carolina of 24.06 set in 1999 during Hurricane Floyd. Hoffman, North Carolina, had received 19.96 inches of rain, while Emerald Isle received 11.5 inches.

782,909: Number of customers without power in North Carolina.

137,354: Number of customers without power in South Carolina.

30: Number of collisions overnight as road conditions deteriorated, according to the North Carolina State Highway Patrol.

1 million: Up to 1 million people have evacuated their North Carolina homes, Gov. Cooper said Friday.

20,000: More than 20,000 people in six states -- North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Maryland and Tennessee -- took shelter in 206 Red Cross and community shelters on Thursday.

730,000: The number of blankets available for evacuees. Six-thousand cots and 6 million meals have also been provided.

11 feet: [Storm surge may reach this point in parts of North Carolina.](#)

"People do not live and survive to tell the tale about what their experience is like with storm surge," FEMA administrator Brock Long told "GMA."

40 inches: [Rainfall could reach this point.](#)

2,800: Number of North Carolina National Guard soldiers and airmen and airwomen who are activated. More than 500 of them are already responding to calls across the state.

13: Number of nuclear reactors the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is monitoring near Florence's path.

19: Number of states sending teams to help North Carolina with Florence.

'Uninvited brute': Florence leaves 7 dead; threatens Carolinas with 15 more inches of rain

USA Today

Doug Stanglin

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/09/15/tropical-storm-florence-threatens-carolinas-more-rain/1316259002/>

A weakened Florence slowed to a crawl over South Carolina Saturday, but is expected to pummel the area with powerful winds, storm surges and as much as 15 more inches of rain into the weekend before sliding inward and heading toward the Ohio Valley.

Since marching ashore Friday near Wilmington, North Carolina, as a hurricane, Florence has claimed at least seven lives, caused widespread flooding and knocked out power to nearly 900,000 homes in the Carolinas, according to poweroutage.us.

Now, as a tropical storm, Florence is expected to dump an additional 10 to 15 inches of rain in parts of North and South Carolina, with storm totals reaching 30 to 40 inches along the North Carolina coastal area south of Cape Hatteras.

At 8 a.m. EST Saturday, the center of the storm was about 35 miles west of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, with maximum sustained winds at 50 mph. It was moving at a paltry 2 mph.

The National Hurricane Center warned that Florence will continue to produce "catastrophic flash flooding and prolonged significant river flooding."

North Carolina's Harnett County declared a mandatory evacuation on Saturday along the Lower Little River, which is expected to rise to more than 17 feet above flood stage.

The National Weather Service forecasts the river to reach flood stage at Manchester after 2 a.m. EDT Sunday and crest Monday morning at 35.4 feet. Flood stage is 18 feet.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper called Florence an "uninvited brute" that could wipe out entire communities as it grinds its way across land.

In Washington, President Donald Trump issued a disaster declaration for North Carolina Saturday that will make federal money available to people in the counties of Beaufort, Brunswick, Carteret, Craven, New Hanover, Onslow, Pamlico and Pender, the White House said.

Government aid can include grants for temporary housing and home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses, and other programs to help individuals and business owners recover from the effects of the hurricane.

About 9,700 National Guard troops and civilians have been deployed, with high-water vehicles, helicopters and boats.

"The fact is this storm is deadly and we know we are days away from an ending," Cooper said.

At least seven hurricane-related fatalities were reported since Florence slammed ashore early Friday. A mother and infant died after a tree fell on a house in Wilmington, North Carolina, according to local police. In Hampstead, downed trees prevented emergency crews from reaching a woman who suffered a heart attack.

A fourth person was killed while plugging in a generator and a fifth when he was blown down trying to check on his hunting dogs in Lenoir County, north of Wilmington, according to local authorities.

Officials in North Carolina's Carteret County said Saturday morning that two people died early Friday on Harkers Island, but did not provide further details, [according to local media reports](#).

In New Bern, where the Neuse and Trent rivers intersect, around 200 people were rescued after being stranded in their homes, according to Mayor Dana Outlaw. Another 150, including some trapped in second floors of houses or in attics, awaited rescue.

"What happens is that we rescue some people and then we find out there are still more who need it," Outlaw said. "People who live in New Bern have experienced hurricanes before, but it has been a long time since we have experienced something like this."

The mayor said at least 4,200 homes and 300 businesses sustained damage from flooding.

"Things here are very, very serious," he said. "If you've ever doubted the destructiveness of a hurricane, what's happening here will make you a believer."

More than 60 people, including an infant, children and their pets, were rescued from a collapsing hotel in Jacksonville, North Carolina, at the height of the storm, according to WITN-TV.

In Newport, North Carolina, rescuers were able to reach a flooded animal shelter after the Carteret County Humane Society put out a call for help on Facebook. The Cajun Navy, a group of volunteers in boats, brought two stranded shelter workers, 43 dogs, 80 cats and roughly 15 chickens to safety.

In Wilmington's riverfront area, near where Florence made landfall on Friday, the Cape Fear River poured over its banks, flooding most of the parking lots, docks and roadways leading to Wrightsville Beach.

Trees fell on downtown streets, which also displayed broken storefront windows and damaged street signs.

In a historic neighborhood just outside of downtown, mature oaks and other large trees had fallen onto gardens, gates, roofs and parked cars.

FEMA to test 'Presidential Alert' system next week

NBC

September 14, 2018

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/fema-test-presidential-alert-system-next-week-n909816>

Next Thursday, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will do its first test of a system that allows the president to send a message to most U.S. cellphones.

More than 100 mobile carriers, including all the major wireless firms, are participating in the roll out, FEMA stated in a message [on its website posted Thursday](#).

"The EAS [[Emergency Alert System](#)] is a national public warning system that provides the President with the communications capability to address the nation during a national emergency," FEMA said.

The test message will have a header that reads "Presidential Alert," according to the agency.

Users whose phones are on will twice hear a tone and vibration and then see an English-only (for now) message: "THIS IS A TEST of the National Wireless Emergency Alert System. No action is needed."

The wireless emergency alerts (WEA) system was authorized by Congress in 2015 under [a law](#) that states the "system shall not be used to transmit a message that does not relate to a natural disaster, act of terrorism, or other man-made disaster or threat to public safety."

Experts didn't appear to be too concerned that Trump, known to use his smartphone to blast opponents, berate subordinates and take shots at the news media on Twitter, could abuse WEA.

"If you separate this from the politics and personality of any individual president then this is a great idea and an amazing use of technology to reach everybody if they're in harms way," said Karen North, director of the Annenberg Digital Social Media program at the University of Southern California.

UCLA communications professor Tim Groeling agreed, writing via email, "broadcast-based emergency alert systems ... have remained professional and impartial over decades."

The WEA is a new way to reach an America increasingly attracted to fragmented forms of media found on phones, tablets and laptops. The well-worn emergency alert system reaches mainly radio and television broadcasters, cable systems, satellite radio and television providers.

"A system like this seems necessary in an era where most people are disconnected from 'live' media like radio and television," Groeling said.

FEMA stated that the government cannot track end users' location through this alert system.

The test is supposed to take place at 2:18 p.m. EDT on Sept. 20. Under the Warning, Alert, and Response Network (WARN) Act of 2006, cellphone users cannot opt out of the presidential alerts.

Congress subpoenas 'uncooperative' DHS official amid accusations of punishing whistleblowers

ABC News

Jeffrey Cook

September 14, 2018 – 5:08 PM

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/congress-subpoenas-uncooperative-dhs-official-amid-accusations-punishing/story?id=57830844>

After allegedly refusing to cooperate with investigators, Congressional leaders are ordering a senior Department of Homeland Security official to answer questions regarding reported retaliation against whistleblowers within the department, according to documents obtained by ABC News.

The subpoena, issued Friday by the House Oversight Committee, directs DHS's Principal Deputy General Counsel Joseph Maher to appear for an interview after

allegedly denying their request to comply with the committee's orders to turn over documents and answer questions for nearly two years.

"With most government officials, subpoenas do not even have to be threatened, much less executed," Trey Gowdy (R-South Carolina) wrote in a letter to Maher, which was obtained by ABC News. "Therefore, your uncooperative posture is a telling and unacceptable outlier."

The committee accuses the Transportation Security Administration, an agency under the DHS umbrella, of withholding and redacting documents in an effort to hide senior-level misconduct from investigators. Investigators believe the agency did so at the direction of Maher's office, according to the subpoena.

But in a statement, DHS Press Secretary Tyler Q. Houlton, told ABC News that DHS "has cooperated and worked in good faith with the committee throughout its oversight of TSA."

"The Department has provided the committee access to all documents requested; has had senior officials testify at hearings on the subject; has had multiple officials sit for separate interviews; has provided detailed, written explanations of its document production policies; and has repeatedly offered to meet with and brief the committee and its staff. The Department is also fully complying with legal requirements to provide documents to the Office of Special Counsel. Any assertion that our principal deputy general counsel has not cooperated with the committee is untrue."

In December 2017, TSA Chief Counsel Francine Kerner testified on Capitol Hill that it was Maher who ordered staff to invoke attorney-client privilege, preventing committee investigators from obtaining full documents.

The U.S. Office of the Special Counsel, the independent agency tasked with protecting whistleblowers, found three cases in 2014 where TSA supervisors were reassigned after disclosing airport operations and safety lapses to leadership.

"TSA faulted the complainants for poor leadership and abruptly reassigned them from their airports," according to a release from the OSC.

The OSC said in May 2018 that TSA had stopped "its discretionary practice of widespread geographic reassignments," and created a program to stop whistleblower retaliation.

The committee's deposition of Maher is planned for Sept. 25, the day before TSA Administrator David Pekoske is scheduled to testify in front of the committee.

Telling the stories of Puerto Rican victims of Maria

Associated Press

Michael Weissenstein, Ana Campoy and Omayra Sosa

September 14, 2018

<https://apnews.com/519dba8360744544827222eae378d9af>

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Ramona Gonzalez did not drown when Hurricane Maria drenched Puerto Rico. She did not die in the tempest, or from destruction wrought by the storm's 154 mph (248 kph) winds.

Instead, this disabled, 59-year-old woman died a month later, from sepsis — caused, says her family, by an untreated bedsore.

In all, the storm and its aftermath took the lives of unfortunates like Gonzalez and thousands of others, many of whom could have been saved with standard medical treatment. This was a slow-motion, months-long disaster that kept Puerto Ricans from getting the care they needed for treatable ailments, even as President Donald Trump lauded his administration's response.

A year after Maria roared across the Caribbean, reporters for The Associated Press, the news site Quartz and Puerto Rico's Center for Investigative Journalism have put together [the most detailed portrait](#) yet of the agonizing final days of victims of the storm, interviewing 204 families of the dead and reviewing accounts of 283 more to tell the stories of heretofore anonymous victims.

Trump cast doubt on the storm's widely accepted death toll Thursday, tweeting that "3000 people did not die" when Maria hit after a near-miss by Hurricane Irma in September, 2017. He said the death count had been inflated "by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible," by adding unrelated deaths to the toll from causes like old age.

But the joint investigation reflects how Puerto Rico's most vulnerable fell victim to dire conditions created by the storms.

Disabled and elderly people were discharged from overwhelmed hospitals with bedsores that led to fatal infections. Medical oxygen ran out. People caught lung infections in sweltering private nursing homes and state facilities. Kidney patients got abbreviated treatments from dialysis centers that lacked generator fuel and fresh water, despite pleas for federal and local officials to treat them as a higher priority, according to patient advocates.

There was Ernesto Curiel, a diabetic who died of a heart attack after weeks of walking 10 flights twice a day to fetch insulin from his building's only working refrigerator. Alejandro González Vázquez, 47 — unable to obtain his anti-psychotic medication, he committed suicide instead of boarding his flight back to the U.S. mainland. Juana Castro Rivera, 52, dead of leptospirosis, a disease transmitted by contaminated water. After several visits to a community clinic, she was diagnosed — too late — by a hospital in a neighboring municipality.

Along with post-storm conditions, each death has a complex mix of causes that can include serious pre-existing conditions and individual decisions by patients, caregivers and doctors, making it difficult to definitively apportion blame in every case. But critics say many could have been saved by better preparation and emergency response.

“I was looking for help and no one came,” said Maria Gonzalez Munoz, who spent 30 days after the storm caring for her sister in her blacked-out home.

The Gonzalez home is 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) from the convention center that served as headquarters for thousands of federal and local emergency responders for more than a month after the storm. Maria and her brother took Ramona to a hospital twice, and tried to get her aboard a Navy medical ship in San Juan harbor, but couldn’t save their ailing sister.

“No one was asking after us, no one from the government,” said Gonzalez Munoz, 66.

The hurricane’s true death toll has fueled debate since the first days of the storm, in large part because of the near-unique nature of the disaster.

The United States’ deadliest hurricanes have killed most of their victims with powerful winds and flooding in the hours and days immediately before and after landfall. The National Hurricane Center says that Katrina struck Louisiana and other states in 2005 it caused 1,500 direct deaths and 300 indirect ones from causes like heart attacks and failed medical equipment.

Largely due to decades of neglect and years of fiscal crisis, the Puerto Rican electrical grid collapsed into the United States’ longest-ever blackout after Maria hit on Sept. 20, 2017. That spawned a long and deadly tail for the storm, with hundreds of deaths coming long after the first weeks of the storm, as medical equipment failed and sick people weakened in the suffocating heat.

Researchers from George Washington University hired by Puerto Rico’s government estimated last month that 2,975 people had died because of Maria in the six months after landfall, a number Puerto Rico accepted as official.

Though Trump continued to assert this week that his administration’s efforts in Puerto Rico were “incredibly successful,” both the local and federal governments have been heavily criticized for inadequate planning and post-storm response. The GWU report found that Puerto Rico had no plan for communication with its citizens in a crisis. The Center for Investigative Journalism found in May that the island’s health department had no emergency response plan for hospitals and other medical facilities.

As for the Trump administration, more than half of federal emergency personnel in Puerto Rico were not qualified for their assigned tasks as of October 2017, a month after landfall, according to a Sept. 5 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Puerto Rico's health secretary and governor did not respond to requests for comment. The public safety secretary said he was willing to speak but was not available to comment in time for publication of this report

An after-action report by FEMA found it had underestimated the food and fresh water needed, and how hard it would be to get supplies to the island. Puerto Rico was understocked in part because Hurricane Irma struck two weeks before Maria, battering the U.S. Virgin Islands. Staff was depleted because of wildfires and other major natural disasters.

In an op-ed written in USA Today, FEMA administrator Brock Long said the report was not an admission of failure.

"Nothing can be further from the truth," he wrote. "Instead, the report is a transformational document intended to build upon successes."

Ramona Gonzalez's sister said she had long suffered from a degenerative brain disease that left her unable to get out of bed starting more than two years before the storm. Without air-conditioning, fresh water or power, she developed steadily worsening bedsores. She was admitted and sent home twice from overwhelmed San Juan hospitals, even though her relatives said they were unable to treat her sores.

Desperate, Ramona's siblings tried to get her aboard the USNS Comfort, a Navy hospital ship that had arrived in Puerto Rico Oct. 3. But patients needed to be referred by San Juan's main public hospital rather than showing up directly for treatment, a complicated process. Maria Gonzalez tried unsuccessfully to get a referral from her sister's overwhelmed private hospital to the public one to the hospital ship.

"I called someone at the medical center but they put me through to another number and then someone called and said it had to be handled by a doctor over there," Maria Gonzalez said. "I said, 'But she's really bad. At least let her on the boat a few days because the heat is killing her!'"

On Oct. 19, Trump said he graded the federal response to Maria as an "A-plus" and a 10 out of 10.

"We have done a really great job," he said.

Ramona Gonzalez died in hospital the next day. Her doctor did not answer phone calls or text messages seeking comment.

Tom VanLeunen, a spokesman for the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command, said the Comfort returned to San Juan on Oct. 26 and moored at a pier accessible to the public, which allowed more than 6,000 patients to be seen before it left on Nov. 20.

Over the last year, the CPI, Quartz and AP project collected hundreds of reports from Puerto Ricans who believed their relatives had died because of the storm. The names of the dead were matched against a database of death certificates released by the Puerto Rican government after a lawsuit by the CPI.

Of those that matched, journalists interviewed as many relatives of the dead as possible and reviewed responses sent to the project through online surveys when relatives couldn't be reached.

Most of the deaths in the database are considered indirect, meaning they were not caused by winds or flooding but rather made more likely because of factors like the lack of power, fresh water and medical supplies after the storm. The project did not interview the patients' doctors and the death certificates themselves make no link to Maria. The Puerto Rican government acknowledges that hundreds or thousands of deaths should have been classified as storm-related but weren't, due to doctors' lack of training on how to correctly fill out death certificates.

An analysis of every single death in Puerto Rico from the onset of Maria until the end of 2017 found that fatal incidents of sepsis, a life-threatening complication of infection, rose nearly 44 percent, to 325, when compared to the average of the previous three years. Kidney-related fatalities rose nearly 43 percent, to 211.

The analysis also showed big jumps in deaths related to respiratory diseases, accidents, and suicides, as well as increases in deaths among Puerto Ricans ages 30 to 44, despite the widespread belief that the disaster mostly affected the aged.

Dr. Cruz Maria Nazario, an epidemiologist and professor at the medical school of the University of Puerto Rico, said the island's medical system had failed in the hurricane due to a lack of long-term preparation that continued up until the days immediately before Maria landed.

"These are deaths that could have been avoided," Nazario said.

Puerto Rico's governor said last week that his administration has adopted new measures to better prepare for a disaster like Maria although he warned of limitations given the U.S. territory's economic crisis.

Rossello said two warehouses filled with water and food are operating in the island's north and south coasts, and that another two will open soon. Prior to Maria, there were none.

He also said the government now has lists that identify vulnerable populations, including those who live in nursing homes, and direct emergency lines have been installed in some nursing homes and other vulnerable locations.

Puerto Rico has one of the United States' highest rates of kidney failure but federal and local emergency plans classified dialysis as a relatively low priority for emergency supplies of fuel and water, despite pleas from patient advocates, said Angela Diaz, executive director of the Renal Council of Puerto Rico, a non-profit group that tries to improve conditions for kidney disease patients.

With public water systems down due to lack of power after the Category 4 storm, Puerto Rico's 46 private dialysis centers swiftly ran out of specially treated water necessary for dialysis, forcing them to ration care, she said.

"We were there at FEMA headquarters practically shouting, 'This site doesn't have water, it hasn't arrived,'" Diaz said. "They came, eventually. But the thinking at first was, they're private, they need to take care of it themselves."

Orlando Lopez Martinez developed diabetes decades ago and the disease damaged his kidneys and forced him to begin dialysis toward the end of 2014. When Maria hit, he had just undergone surgery on an infected foot.

The private center in far western Puerto Rico where he received 4½ hours of dialysis three days a week shut down, and he missed four days of treatment over more than a week, according to friends and family.

When it reopened, it rationed dialysis and Lopez received two hours of dialysis per session, less than half of what he received before the storm, friends and family said.

"His face changed color completely. His face was really pale. He got dialysis and changed back, his face got color. But in those days after the storm he looked pale, yellowish, really bad," said Lady Diana Torres, the mother of Lopez' 10-year-old daughter Paola.

Lopez died on Oct. 10. He was 48. The official cause of death was a heart attack brought on by kidney disease.

There was no answer at the publicly listed number for Lopez's primary doctor.

This month, Paola wrote about her father when her teacher asked the class to hand in short essays about the people they considered their hero.

"In my memories, I have my super hero, strong and protective, who takes care of me and loves me," she wrote. "He had a lot of battles, but in the last battle, Hurricane Maria beat him."

Tyler Q. Houlton

Press Secretary

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

(b)(6)

Sender:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
	(b)(6)
Recipient:	"S1KMN (b)(6)
	(b)(6)
	"Wolf, Chad (b)(6)
	(b)(6)
	"Hoffman, Jonathan (b)(6)
	(b)(6)
	"Lim, Evelyn (b)(6)
	(b)(6)
	"Taylor, Miles (b)(6)
	(b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/15 10:43:27
Delivered Date:	2018/09/15 10:43:28

From:	Hoffman, Jonathan (b)(6)
To:	"Wolf, Chad (b)(6) (b)(6) "S1KMN (b)(6) (b)(6)
Subject:	FW: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:07:52
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

.....This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible when I was successfully raising Billions of Dollars to help rebuild Puerto Rico. If a person died for any reason, like old age, just add them onto the list. Bad politics. I love Puerto Rico!

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	Hoffman, Jonathan (b)(6)
Recipient:	"Wolf, Chad (b)(6) (b)(6) "S1KMN (b)(6) (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 09:07:51
Delivered Date:	2018/09/13 09:07:52

From:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
To:	"Waldman, Katie (b)(6)
Subject:	Re: what am i missing?
Date:	2018/09/15 12:12:48
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

It's in there

Tyler Q. Houlton
Press Secretary
DHS

On Sep 15, 2018, at 12:03 PM, Waldman, Katie (b)(6) wrote:

Did you get the abc story updated with your quote in this. Don't use the one where we didn't respond

On Sep 15, 2018, at 10:19 AM, Houlton, Tyler (b)(6) wrote:

Any stories I'm missing? JH Are you sending to S1?

[WSJ: White House Considered Replacing FEMA Chief as Florence Was Gathering Steam](#)

[ABC: Florence by the numbers: 7 dead, more than 900K without power, strongest wind gust in 60 years hits Wilmington](#)

[USA Today: 'Uninvited brute': Florence leaves 7 dead; threatens Carolinas with 15 more inches of rain](#)

[NBC: FEMA to test 'Presidential Alert' system next week](#)

[ABC: Congress subpoenas 'uncooperative' DHS official amid accusations of punishing whistleblowers](#)

[AP: Telling the stories of Puerto Rican victims of Maria](#)

TRUMP TWEETS:

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

"The story of Puerto Rico is the rebuilding that has occurred. The President has done an extraordinary job of cleanup, rebuilding electrical stuff and everything else." @EdRollins "The people

From:	(b)(6) (b)(6)
To:	"Houlton, Tyler (b)(6) (b)(6)
CC:	"Waldman, Katie (b)(6) (b)(6)
Subject:	Re: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:08:26
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

Will send. Adding in Katie so we don't duplicate efforts

On Sep 13, 2018, at 9:06 AM, Houlton, Tyler (b)(6) wrote:

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went

by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

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died for any reason, like old age, just add them onto the list. Bad politics. I love Puerto Rico!

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	(b)(6)	(b)(6)
	(b)(6)	(b)(6)
Recipient:	"Houlton, Tyler	(b)(6)
	(b)(6)	(b)(6)
	"Waldman, Katie	(b)(6)
	(b)(6)	(b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 09:08:25	
Delivered Date:	2018/09/13 09:08:26	

From:	Comms Alert (b)(6)
Subject:	Donald J. Trump Tweet
Date:	2018/09/14 18:38:43
Type:	Note

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

“They say all these people died in the storm in Puerto Rico, yet 70% of the power was out before the storm. So when did people start dying? At what point do you recognize that what they are doing is a political agenda couched in the nice language of journalism?”

@GeraldoRivera

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040730663832498176>

Sender:	Comms Alert (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/14 18:38:25
Delivered Date:	2018/09/14 18:38:43

From:	Comms Alert (b)(6)
Subject:	Donald J. Trump Tweet
Date:	2018/09/14 22:15:57
Type:	Note

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

“When Trump visited the island territory last October, OFFICIALS told him in a briefing 16 PEOPLE had died from Maria.” The Washington Post. This was long AFTER the hurricane took place. Over many months it went to 64 PEOPLE. Then, like magic, “3000 PEOPLE KILLED.” They hired....

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040783519423913984>

Sender:	Comms Alert (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/14 22:15:52
Delivered Date:	2018/09/14 22:15:57

From:	Comms Alert (b)(6)
Subject:	Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 08:51:47
Type:	Note

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went

by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

.....This was done by the Democrats in order to make me look as bad as possible when I was successfully raising Billions of Dollars to help rebuild Puerto Rico. If a person

died for any reason, like old age, just add them onto the list. Bad politics. I love Puerto Rico!

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	Comms Alert (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 08:51:44
Delivered Date:	2018/09/13 08:51:47

From:	Taylor, Miles (b)(6)
To:	"S1KMN (b)(6)
Subject:	Fwd: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 10:30:05
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

These were the tweets.

Miles Taylor
Deputy Chief of Staff
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
M: (b)(6)

Begin forwarded message:

From: (b)(6) (b)(6)
Date: September 13, 2018 at 9:10:02 AM EDT
Subject: Donald J. Trump Tweets

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

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<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	Taylor, Miles (b)(6)
Recipient:	"S1KMN (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 10:30:04
Delivered Date:	2018/09/13 10:30:05

From:	Marquardt, Kristen (b)(6)
To:	(b)(6)
Subject:	FW: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:10:04
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

From: (b)(6)

Sent: Thursday, September 13, 2018 9:10:02 AM (UTC-05:00) Eastern Time (US &Canada)

Subject: Donald J. Trump Tweets

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

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<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	Marquardt, Kristen	(b)(6)
	(b)(6)	(b)(6)
Recipient:	(b)(6)	(b)(6)
	(b)(6)	(b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 09:10:04	

From:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
To:	"Fulop, Lesley (b)(6)
Subject:	FW: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:06:08
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

Please send around

Tyler Q. Houlton

Press Secretary

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

(b)(6)

From: Comms Alert (b)(6)
Sent: Thursday, September 13, 2018 8:52 AM
Subject: Donald J. Trump Tweets

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

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<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
Recipient:	"Fulop, Lesley (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 09:06:07
Delivered Date:	2018/09/13 09:06:08

From:	Nalepa, Jessica (b)(6)
To:	"Houlton, Tyler (b)(6) (b)(6) "Burke, Jenny (b)(6) (b)(6)
Subject:	Re: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:22:36
Type:	Note

Yes, thanks

Get [Outlook for iOS](#)

From: Houlton, Tyler <tyler.houlton@hq.dhs.gov>

Sent: Thursday, September 13, 2018 9:07:15 AM

To: Nalepa, Jessica; Burke, Jenny

Subject: FW: Donald J. Trump Tweets

Sure you've already seen. Refer them to WH off the record

From:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
To:	"Nalepa, Jessica (b)(6) (b)(6) "Burke, Jenny (b)(6) (b)(6)
Subject:	FW: Donald J. Trump Tweets
Date:	2018/09/13 09:07:16
Priority:	Normal
Type:	Note

Sure you've already seen. Refer them to WH off the record

Tyler Q. Houlton

Press Secretary

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

(b)(6)

From: Comms Alert (b)(6)
Sent: Thursday, September 13, 2018 8:52 AM
Subject: Donald J. Trump Tweets

Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

3000 people did not die in the two hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico. When I left the Island, AFTER the storm had hit, they had anywhere from 6 to 18 deaths. As time went by it did not go up by much. Then, a long time later, they started to report really large numbers, like 3000...

<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040217897703026689>

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<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1040220855400386560>

Sender:	Houlton, Tyler (b)(6)
Recipient:	"Nalepa, Jessica (b)(6) (b)(6) "Burke, Jenny (b)(6) (b)(6)
Sent Date:	2018/09/13 09:07:15
Delivered Date:	2018/09/13 09:07:16